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SUBJECT: KIMBERLEY INDIGENOUS PEOPLE CONFRONT THEIR FUTURE
REF: PERTH 51

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¶1. (U) Summary: This is the second of two cables reporting on a visit by ConGen staff to the north west Kimberley region. In the face of enormous challenges, advancement programs are making headway to improve living conditions in the far north Kimberley region of Western Australia (WA) for the Indigenous people who form a large proportion of the Kimberley's population. During a visit to Broome, Fitzroy Crossing and One Arm Point, the Consul General and CG staff members, traveling with four WA State members of parliament, engaged with Indigenous leaders about the challenges posed to the community by development, including the proposed A\$43 billion (US\$40 billion) Browse Basin liquefied natural gas (LNG) gas project near Broome. Invitations to non-public events -- the annual general meeting of the Kimberley Land Council that sets economic and social policy, an evening of "corroboree" songs and dances celebrating traditional culture, and a meeting of the Fitzroy Futures Forum community group with state and federal officials - provided evidence of how Indigenous advancement programs are seeking to align economic development with traditional practices. Communities are seeking explicitly to cope with educational, medical, social, and substance-abuse challenges in innovative ways. End Summary.

Resources Development Pressures in Broome

¶2. (SBU) During ConGen Perth's visit to the Kimberley region of WA September 28-October 2, government and community representatives from Broome, Fitzroy Crossing and One Arm Point presented us with their local solutions to confront and overcome past crises and face present concerns. High among these issues is the community response to resources-linked development, including housing availability; long-standing challenges associated with alcohol abuse and related problems; high Indigenous mortality rates; and low educational achievement. Citing the advent of the LNG gas hub development at James Price Point 60 kilometers north of Broome (Perth 51), a nationally-prominent Indigenous community elder, Professor Patrick Dodson, raised with the Consul General his concerns about the effect of the influx of population into the region. He expects an additional 7,000 people will add to the already accommodation-stressed population of around 36,000 people (about half of whom are Indigenous). Serious housing and accommodation shortages will require concerted efforts by both the state government and local entities to provide for the anticipated swell in numbers. Any development proposal, Dodson stressed, must take into account Indigenous heritage issues and be

implemented in a way that allows the people to maintain their law and culture.

How and How Not to Share the Benefits

¶3. (SBU) Broome Shire President Graham Campbell similarly insisted that such infrastructure issues must be addressed by the gas hub developers before the Shire offers its support to the project. "We don't want to repeat the Pilbara experience" he said, alluding to the mineral-rich region to the west, where the recent boom in resource development caused outlying districts to be crammed with displaced poor people as the cost of living soared in mining towns. A visit to the Broome Regional Prison with one parliamentarian, the Shadow Minister for Corrective Services, emphasized the imbalance of benefits flowing to the local community, as reflected in local incarceration rates: of a total of 160 prisoners, only three were non-Indigenous. To provide young people in Broome with other alternatives, the Goolarri Media Centre provides access for school children to a room with a few dozen computers for learning and play; about 1,000 children have used the room since it opened almost a year ago.

Fitzroy Faces its Future

¶4. (SBU) Fitzroy Crossing, about 400 kilometers east of Broome, PERTH 00000055 002 OF 003

provided an impressive model of effective Indigenous community participation to confront many challenges. The town's Fitzroy Futures Forum provides a framework to build a partnership between government and Indigenous people, who comprise more than 80 percent of the local population of the surrounding Fitzroy Valley. This partnership was established in 2007 by the women in the Fitzroy community with a campaign for restrictions on full-strength alcohol sales in response to the crisis of alcohol consumption. Alcohol abuse was the chief cause of dysfunctional behavior, school truancy, disease, violence, and suicide. Local Forum participant and community leader Emily Carter highlighted the brutal legacy of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) on children and families: "We have lost two generations. Old aunties are raising grandkids and great grandkids, but they are dying off." While early indications suggest the restrictions have been positive for the isolated town, with significant improvement across-the-board in health and well-being, further assistance is still required, particularly medical assistance for children suffering from FASD trauma, estimated at more than a quarter of the population between two and forty years of age.

Establishing a Model of Indigenous Governance

¶5. (SBU) Fitzroy Crossing is one of 29 Australian Indigenous community sites, and one of only four locations in WA, selected by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in 2008 to participate in a "Closing the Gap" initiative to achieve common Indigenous development targets throughout the nation. The program provides a new model to close the life expectancy gap, improve the mortality gap for children under five, and improve educational standards. A site visit by COAG operatives coincided with our September visit to Fitzroy Crossing, where they met with members of the Fitzroy Futures Forum to outline the new program framework for federal/state and community delivery of services. The Federal Indigenous Affairs Department Head, Dr. Jeffrey Harmer, stated that in contrast to the

intervention programs in the Northern Territory, the government will implement more "bottom up", instead of "top down," approaches to elicit greater community involvement and local ownership. "If it works," he said, "it won't go back." Negotiated agreements with local communities, he assured the meeting participants, will be long-term and go beyond the life of the incumbent government.

Kimberley Land Council - a Key Player

¶ 16. (SBU) The CG, Consulate staff, and parliamentarians also attended the annual general meeting of the Kimberley Land Council (KLC), a regional representative body, where Indigenous communities from all parts of the Kimberley come together for meetings and celebrations of traditional culture. KLC leader Wayne Bergmann advocated for reforms in literacy education, and was adamant that the entire Kimberley community should benefit from the multi-billion-dollar Browse Basin gas development (Reftel), not just the traditional owners of the land immediately affected at James Price Point, where the industrial facilities will be located, and in nearby Broome. Local elder Kevin George told us he feared, however, that people living in outlying regions would be further isolated and possibly overlooked in the new model of service delivery and resources development priorities.

Indigenous Employment Opportunities Link with Traditions

¶ 17. (SBU) Employment and educational opportunities are coming into sharp focus for the region. Local communities and governmental environment agencies have collaborated to establish the Kimberley Ranger Initiative -- a significant group from local regions to manage the land according to traditional custom and land management practices, and to provide youth employment, termed "Looking after Country." Elder Kevin George, who is also Head Ranger, told us he was the last of his age group to be involved with the Rangers and that he looked forward to handing off to the next generation to look after their traditional lands. The KLC says it wants to ensure that resources-linked job opportunities flow through to, and benefit, the entire

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Kimberley region.

Comment: Positive Steps Amidst Major Challenges

¶ 18. (SBU) Western Australia's far north Kimberley Indigenous groups are taking significant steps to better their conditions. In contrast to strongly negative reporting in the mainstream urban media, the reality is mixed, and includes active pursuit by local communities of initiatives to confront long-standing issues and resolve current problems. These communities are establishing projects, both independently and with business and government, to manage economic development in the region in an effort to benefit the Indigenous population within the framework of their traditional law and culture. Although many impediments remain, impressive community participation is being presented as an alternative to the model of federal intervention. End Comment.

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